
Phil Smith Symposium

GUERRILLA PEDAGOGY: ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SURPRISE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN EDUCATION

Lisa D. Weems
Miami University

The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can't move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.

—Gloria Anzaldúa¹

“The Enlightenment is sick at home,” announces Gayatri Spivak in her latest book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*.² In this statement Spivak diagnoses the deleterious impact of neo-colonial and entrepreneurial frameworks on higher education. The university's internationalization becomes another site for “rogue capitalism” as human life's complex dimensionality is reduced to the commodification of diversity and cultural experience. Framed as intercultural competence, a core curriculum of “American monoculture” thinly masquerades as engagement with the “multicultural classics.”³ The result, according to Spivak, is the contemporary Euro-US academy turns out “the scholar...as a[n] epistemologically challenged market analyst.”⁴ She argues that, inside the academy, interdisciplinarity has worked in tandem with global capitalism such that key features of humanistic or aesthetic emphases on language, philosophy, and history in understanding human life are now marked by practices of “shrinking diversity” as well as the “rationalization of the transcendent.”⁵ Furthermore, Spivak argues, American monoculture posing as “cosmopolitanism” or global thinking is packaged and delivered worldwide. The metaphor of traveling has never been more troubling.⁶

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Sisters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 20.

² Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Here I mean to signal the productive tensions within feminist theorizing on “travel” and “traveling” as a metaphor for coalitional work across difference. Specifically, see

Given the role of US higher education as a primary institution for the production of “global citizens” and “leaders of tomorrow,” Spivak suggests the need to “re-territorialize” the academy and what counts as knowledge production. She writes,

The Euro-US subject must court schizophrenia as figure. In our dwindling isolation cells, we must plumb the forgotten and mandatorily ignored bi-polarity of the social productivity and the social destructiveness of capital and capitalism by affecting the world’s subalterns, in places where s/he speaks, unheard, by way of deep language learning, qualitative social sciences, philosophizing into unconditional ethics.⁷

Here, Spivak outlines the need to traverse epistemological, disciplinary, and geopolitical boundaries. However, she does not suggest a naïve cosmopolitanism that assumes symmetrical accessibility and mobility. For nearly 30 years Spivak has remained vigilant in reinforcing the subaltern’s fundamental definition: “to be *removed* from all lines of social mobility.”⁸ Thus, I emphasize the phrase “to plumb the *forgotten* and mandatorily *ignored*...in places where she speaks, unheard”⁹ as a caution against such imagined global community (or as Chandra Mohanty writes, the idea of a political project “without borders”).¹⁰ Instead, Spivak calls for “people of our sort” (a definition that suits me) not only to move beyond own our zones of epistemological comfort, but to question the very institutionalized boundaries of knowledge and knowledge production that “mandatorily” render some beings unintelligible or unworthy of a “livable life.”¹¹ Our task is to engage the world’s subalterns in places where they speak, unheard.

In response to Spivak’s call, I propose a “guerilla pedagogy.” I characterize guerilla pedagogy as a form of engagement that makes use of a wide range of strategies, tactics, and missives toward the aim of re-territorializing both the academy and what counts as knowledge production. Guerilla pedagogy take for granted subjectivity and collaboration are constituted through difference and conflict, and that both operate with generative dynamics. Furthermore, guerilla pedagogy borrows methods and activities of deep-language learning as well as qualitative social sciences and philosophizing into unconditional ethics. Such ethical philosophizing is

Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁷ Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).

consonant with a “pedagogy of discomfort,”¹² and “novel education”¹³ in that the psychical and affective dimensions of teaching and learning become foregrounded as ethical practices. In tandem with Sharon Todd’s notion that “ethics itself [is] an education project,”¹⁴ I argue there are always already political and ethical dimensions of pedagogy, regardless of whether they appear implicit or explicit.¹⁵ Todd notes, “Within this line of thinking, it is by teaching and learning principles and appropriate ways of behaving that ethics is brought together with the everyday problems and dilemmas that vex us, thereby making ethics itself an education project.”¹⁶ Thus, grounding the project of “pedagogy” and “ethics” within philosophical as well as socio-cultural and historical analyses of everyday problems and dilemmas affords pedagogy a place in the construction of critical subjectivity and communities of dissensus.¹⁷

In the following pages, I discuss three attributes I associate with guerilla pedagogy: performativity, surprise, and responsibility. Let me begin by recounting two grounding assumptions. First, guerilla pedagogy may occur in educational spaces, but is neither bound to schools nor educational institutions. In, fact, given the highly ritualized aspects of formal schooling, it may be logical to assume that if moments of learning occur in the classroom, they go largely unrecognized. Yes, moments of discovery are highly encouraged in formal schooling. However, schooling’s stagnant climate is, in part, owed to learning outcomes being so highly prescribed and fetishized that unexpected learning, when it does occur, can often be overlooked because unexpected learning is not the focus of attention. A teacher is to look for observable and measurable demonstrations of learning. Thus a teacher’s attention is oriented¹⁸ toward recognition of his or her own constructions (still prescribed) of what constitutes knowledge, learning, and assessment.

It is highly likely guerilla pedagogy will occur outside brick and mortar buildings. Regardless of age, location, and epistemological orientation, my sense is that most of our learning as thinking, breathing human beings occurs in the smallest moments among peers, family members, and friends (I

¹² Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹³ Deborah P. Britzman, *Novel Education: Psychoanalytic Studies of Learning and Not Learning* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

¹⁴ Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Lisa Weems, “To Be Mindful of Otherness: Toward a Post-Psychoanalytic Problematic of Ethics and Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 38 (2007): 37–50.

¹⁶ Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 5.

¹⁷ Ewa Pionowska Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2006).

think this sort of learning is what novelists Arundhati Roy, Sherman Alexie, and others document so beautifully). This is not to suggest learning is the product of an individual, universal subject's voluntary will. Quite the contrary; I mean to suggest learning is nested within contexts of meaning, and objects or practices can be framed as important instruction or even wisdom through formal and informal networks of association. Historically, progressive educators and community leaders have foregrounded those pedagogical dynamics occurring within and across civic organizations. Furthermore, contemporary research on the educational benefits of new media foregrounds how digital youth in their learning lives make use of peer and expert cultures across various contexts (home, school, etc.). Given that we know learning occurs in small moments among family and peers, a question remains: how will pedagogues promote and facilitate engagement with curricula that encourages imagination rather than regurgitation?

My second grounding assumption is educational spaces are saturated with "histories of hurt" as well as interpersonal and institutional relations of power. If the institutionalization of education has stifled learning for most students, it is most especially true for historically colonized, minoritized, and marginalized students based upon their nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or ability, among other characteristics. As I discuss elsewhere, students inherit and re-circulate embodied narratives about schooling's role in personal, professional, and intellectual growth, and in economic and social im/mobility as well as inter/cultural opportunities.¹⁹ As Soja reminds us, spaces not only reflect social identities of the people who inhabit them, but spaces also produce identities and the range of motion and relations within and among people.²⁰ We may then come to see educational spaces not as open, safe spaces with four "clean" whiteboards, but plastered with and cluttered by traces of text and images archived and displayed unproblematically as a shared vision. Recognizing the histories of hurt embedded in educational spaces means we must become mindful that classrooms are minefields where pedagogy does not celebrate multiple viewpoints, but drops and navigates both traumatic and productive thought bombs and affective shrapnel. These are just two contexts that shape education's possibilities, but two that, I argue, are particularly pertinent for theorizing and enacting guerilla pedagogy.

¹⁹ Lisa Weems, "From 'Home' to 'Camp': Theorizing the Space of Safety," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 6 (2010): 557–568.

²⁰ Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

THREE ELEMENTS OF GUERRILLA PEDAGOGY

PERFORMATIVITY

Guerilla pedagogues operate from the premise that teaching and learning is both performative and performance-based. Guerilla pedagogy is performative in the Butlerian sense that the speaking subject “I” is an effect of discourse. Through language and languaging (both of which are interpretive, historical, ritualized, and regulated), I, as the teaching subject, am often mis/recognized as a maternal or feminine figure in the classroom. As such, I often am called to take up the position of “the caring mother” or “the superfluous cheerleader,” auxiliary roles to teaching’s “main event” of intellectual knowledge production. As a result, guerilla pedagogy becomes a performative practice that is the product of discourses on teaching (ranging widely across histories and cultures) *as well as* discourses on warfare. Deploying the figure of the guerilla pedagogue is always already inscribed in discourses of material violence, terrorism, or at least anti-establishment thinking, which, depending upon one’s political perspective, may function as normal, natural, dangerous, or risky.

For some it may seem anachronistic or absurd to theorize the work of teaching and learning in contemporary times. Remember though, that, according to Spivak, we must court schizophrenia as an educative figure. Doing so pushes our imaginations past images of teaching as a clean, politically neutral yet morally righteous activity, toward a framework of knowledge production as a necessarily political activity without easy solutions or a clear sense of our actions’ predictive outcomes. In this way, guerilla pedagogy involves a fundamental re-orientation of the site of learning. Framing the teacher as a figure of schizophrenia takes into account how the current “attention economy in the classroom”²¹ presents many challenges for teaching and learning in the digital age. As De Castell and Jenson note, globalized yet asymmetrical opportunities and participation in technological innovation involves shifting normative discourses and conventions regarding authority, knowledge, and power.²² Specifically, the educative potential and proliferation of digital, image-based “learning tools,” in addition to the accessibility of virtual networks of expertise, exacerbates teachers’ stultified performativity alongside the routine, rational, linear structure of standardized curricula. In other words, a framework of performativity reveals how learning to become a teacher in the current age ironically means purposefully coming to embody contradictory positions of deference and authority within discourses of knowledge and power.

Guerilla pedagogy is also a performance in the sense that the classroom is a stage for various persons to take up prescribed roles and rituals.

²¹ Suzanne De Castell and Jennifer Jenson, “Paying Attention to Attention: New Economies for Learning,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 4 (2004): 381–397.

²² Ibid.

As such, I foreground teaching's theatricality and drama. I utilize my background in theatre and music essentially to direct and orchestrate a narrative arch within and across courses. One of my most important lessons about "performance of pedagogy" came to me through a quantitative sociologist and a critical psychoanalyst who both advised organizing segments into "problems" to be explored together. Key to this pedagogical strategy is introducing *suspense*, or prolonged anticipation, through framing and reframing of "the problem" into particular questions approached on multiple levels.

SURPRISE AND SUSPENSE

The second feature of guerilla pedagogy, then, is working tension between suspense and surprise. To think about these distinctions I draw from three sources, Jacques Derrida,²³ Jonathan Adler,²⁴ and Alfred Hitchcock.²⁵ Grounded in multiple disciplines and genres, this cast of characters each claim that both surprise and suspense are embodied yet largely unconscious activities that rely upon an external stimulus. However, Hitchcock is helpful in suggesting the difference between surprise and suspense is a matter of timing temporality, and the explicit staging of time. Both surprise and suspense suggest an audience that acts and reacts explicitly alongside texts, images, and events, but implicitly involves a third object/actor: that is, someone who constructs the story or prompts the event and draws our attention to it rather than to themselves, at least momentarily. But an aspect of time and timing demarcates surprise as an event that has a quick and immediate impact, yet an impact that may not be sustainable. In turn, suspense manifests within a necessarily slow dynamic that drags out the question, story, or premise as if the very lag of time instigates the focus of attention or orientation toward a particular object. I argue both surprise and suspense are best orchestrated through literary, theatrical, and other dramatic forms of representation where one is quite literally compelled or consumed by the question/problem and the text/film, whichever serves as a proxy or vehicle to the object itself.

In situating my argument for guerilla pedagogy within Spivak's perspective, I necessarily inherit and interrogate Derrida's thinking both on the undecidability of knowledge and on education as a gift that always exceeds its own calculation.²⁶ In other words, surprise is a key feature of education because learning must "surprise the very subjectivity of the subject."²⁷ As Adler expounds, surprise is a visceral reaction and "relative not only to knowledge or belief."²⁸ In addition, surprise can be characterized as "An event

²³ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997).

²⁴ Jonathan Adler, "Surprise," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 1 (2008): 149–171.

²⁵ François Truffaut, *Hitchcock: The Definitive Study of Alfred Hitchcock*, revised ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

²⁶ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*.

²⁷ Ibid, 68.

²⁸ Adler, "Surprise," 154.

or occurrence...contrary to expectation not in itself, but only as described.”²⁹ What Adler, Derrida, and Spivak argue in common (although speaking to and through very different registers) is surprise suggests the possibility and desirability of educational encounters that exist despite calculation, exceed the already-known, and elicit temporary confusion or bewilderment for the sake of calling attention to complexity. To be sure, educational encounters *often* exceed calculated learning. What guerilla pedagogy offers this conversation is the staging of surprise as well as the staging of excesses and failures, contradictions and paradoxes of the pedagogue’s role or “authority” in pedagogical encounters.

RESPONSIBILITY

Derrida suggests an ethical decision must “surprise the very subjectivity of the subject,”³⁰ and he argues that responsibility consists in making the leap away from calculative reasoning. Similarly, Spivak notes, we must take a position but remain open to the call and response of another problematic of responsibility. Responsibility is caught between “an ungraspable call and a setting-to-work.”³¹ What I most appreciate about Spivak’s conceptualization of responsibility is its grounding in particular practices of localized knowledge-building and careful attention to the concreteness of knowledge production. In her essay on responsibility, Spivak expands upon how the logic of whiteness inaugurates the narrative of development. Development, precisely because it has been conceptualized and advanced through the violent relations of imperialism and colonialism, severely constrains how and why “reform” of any kind may be experienced by minoritized and subaltern populations. But, Spivak queries, why would “we” want to deny the subaltern access to “development” knowing development engages a discourse of possibility, opportunity, and legitimacy? We must acknowledge responsibility’s double-bind with/in the mandatorily forgotten, those systems that sustain forgetting, and our complicity in those systems.

Despite the double-bind of agency and complicity produced through Western systems of knowledge production, then, the ethically responsible educator must keep hope alive, precisely through indirect attention and interruption of the ethical. I turn now briefly to discuss a doctoral seminar I regularly teach, “Difference, Power, and Representation,” to illustrate the dimensions of guerilla pedagogy as a possible and desirable (yet highly unpredictable) pedagogical strategy. Difference, Power, and Representation is an advanced cultural studies and qualitative research course structured loosely around Friere’s *praxis* of problem-posing education and a form of

²⁹ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 154.

³⁰ Ibid., 68–69.

³¹ Gayatri Spivak, “Responsibility,” in Silvestra Marienello (eds.) *Gendered Agents: Women and Institutional Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 21.

philosophical ethnography. By this I mean students and I engage matters of everyday life through various theoretical traditions such as argumentation, hermeneutic dialogue, existential narrative, and performance. Assignments and discussion include multi-disciplinary source materials (ranging from theatre, to history, to literature, and social philosophy) to address questions of knowledge production and representation.

I design this seminar-format course to privilege “subjugated knowledges,”³² to explore political and ethical dimensions of researching with and writing about human subjects, or what Spivak refers to as the qualitative social sciences. Yet I purposely frame this course as an advanced seminar in cultural studies that makes use of, but is not limited to, “qualitative inquiry.” While some class activities have been productive in terms of building students’ analytic competencies and technical skills, only a few events can be characterized as guerilla pedagogy. And, to be sure, the most visible “effective” learning typically comes from written and oral comments by peers who challenge their classmates to confront unexpected and emotionally charged insights. For example, one recent incident of guerilla pedagogy came when a student led a mini-workshop on how to utilize Participatory Action Research in community organizing. What was “effective” about this mini-workshop was *not* that all students decided to adopt such a model in their own research; rather, that it incited a heated conversation about the “privilege” of voicing opposition.

Difference, Power and Representation is a writing-heavy course designed for students to try out and workshop various modes of “data representation” in order to illustrate how onto-epistemological assumptions discursively are produced and performative. Utilizing various forms of source material exposes students to the rhetorical credibility of a wider range of representational strategies. Workshopping their writing, however, enables students to learn from their peers on many levels. First, peers are able to give first-impression comments that are often general and generous, thus making the student more likely to remain “open-minded”; 2) peers are sometimes able to make an incisively critical observation in the form of a naïve question; and 3) peers provide a perspectival mirror (more kaleidoscopic *vs.* correspondent) in which students are forced to engage in dialogue regarding images of themselves, the research participants, and their relationships with them.

One might say the course itself *allows* marginalized folks some forms of (epistemological) access and legitimacy in terms of the US/European model of “digitally confident alterglobalists.”³³ Certainly much of our doctoral

³² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

³³ Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 26. Spivak writes, “Muscular Marxists are giving way to the corporate-funded feudality of the digitally confident alterglobalists. Deep language learning and unconditional ethics are so out of joint with this immensely powerful brave new world-machine that people of our sort make this please because we cannot do

program's curriculum operates within critical pragmatist and Freirean traditions of education for empowerment. But what largely is missing—and, I think, out of a legacy of the difficulties surrounding these issues—are encounters that engage with the world's subalterns in the places where s/he speaks, unheard.

I do my best dialogically to engage students in transformative learning, yet I ask them to do as I ask, on my terms, in my language, in spaces in which I hold (and wield) authority. I am the teacher, thus I know what must be learned; I designate what constitutes learning. I may attempt to make the curriculum “relevant” to a broader community or collective of persons affected by and working against global capitalism and multiple forms of oppression. As a pedagogue, I attempt to do this by identifying and offering epistemological bridges among students very differently situated as knowledge producers in the global economy. To be clear, an unequal burden is produced through global capitalism's concrete conditions as noted in a classic text's title by radical women of color: decolonizing education occurs on *This Bridge Called My Back*.³⁴

Yet, a text like *This Bridge Called My Back* illustrates many of guerilla pedagogy's complicated features and implications, consisting of poems, prose, theoretical analyses, and drawings that individually express particular issues regarding language, culture, institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and class struggle. Collectively, the text reads as a manifesto about the politics of representation and education's ambivalent role in creating social change as characterized in Audre Lorde's infamous quotation, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”³⁵ It is a book borne of an impassioned sense of political urgency that forces the reader to confront the embodied experiences of persons living with symbolic, material, institutional, and intimate violence. *This Bridge Called My Back* “does things” pedagogically: it portrays a rich collage of human life affected by oppression, yet committed to survival; it represents a diverse collection of perspectives and authors; it challenges disciplinary boundaries of what constitutes “academic writing”; it provokes embodied reactions for its readers; and it may produce a discursive community through prolonged engagement.

Whether *This Bridge Called My Back* demonstrates an effective strategy of guerilla pedagogy is a question that can only be explored in the

otherwise, because our shared obsession declares that some home of bringing about the epistemological revolution needed to turn capital around to gendered social justice must still be kept alive against all hope” (ibid.). In other words, the least worst position to have in Western higher education is to recognize the double-bind or limits of work in relation to the global corporatization of the academy.

³⁴ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

³⁵ Ibid, 99.

context of a particular classroom, its interpersonal dynamics, its extracurricular dimensions, and those institutional norms in which it is deployed and felt as a tactic of disruption. Thus, guerilla pedagogy can only be *recognized* after a collective learning or transformative event. A collective response comes from unintended and/or unexpected learning in the form of ethically responsible engagement with conflict, struggle, or even loss. Of key importance, these strategies' effects may be unpredictable for all involved and, in this way, guerilla pedagogy involves disruptive learning from below and from the side. Furthermore, the formation of communities, especially communities of dissensus, can be inaugurated through surprise rather than prescription. As such, guerilla pedagogy dislodges the teacher's interpretive authority while repositioning him or her as open to surprise, learning, collective responsibility, and transformation.

Nonetheless, as Spivak argues, it is the task of "our sort of people" to continue the challenge of working within/against developmental narratives that position US scholars as authoritative, cultural brokers complicit in this age of the corporate, global university. We must act as responsible pedagogues caught between "an ungraspable call and a setting-to-work"³⁶ to remain open to the possibilities of learning from below, sideways and the spaces in-between.

³⁶ Spivak, "Responsibility," 21.
